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SUBJECT: Embassy Tirana Weekly Report

Electoral Code Cheered by Some, Jeered by Others

¶1. The Ruling Democratic Party and the opposition Socialists were in a state of jubilation last week as Parliament passed with an over 90 per cent majority the new Electoral Code that will regulate the conduct of the upcoming general elections in Albania. With 113 votes in favor and only one against, Parliament approved a system of rules that will give the two main parties overwhelming control over the electoral process. The Code will establish for the first time in the history of Albanian democracy a proportional electoral system that is expected to have a significant impact in the configuration of the Albanian political establishment. According to the new code, the Central Election Committee will be made up of seven members, five of whom will belong to the two main parties, while the remaining two seats will be allocated by Parliament to smaller parties. Decision making in the CEC will also be shared between the two large parties. For CEC decisions to be valid, both the Chairman and the Deputy will have to co-sign them. The electoral code has also introduced new rules on voter's lists and identification documents. Parliament also boosted the power of party observers by giving them the right to interrupt the vote counting process in case of irregularities. In a more significant achievement for Albania, this is the first time since the fall of communism that the country has in place a proper electoral legal framework eight months before the elections.

¶2. In its most controversial measure, the two main parties stripped the third political force in the country, the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), from the right to have a member in the electoral commissions. While the overwhelming rate of Parliamentary approval for the Code is unprecedented, the approval has raised some questions about the impact of such a measure on the future of democratic institutions in Albania. Some caution that giving Albania's two political leaders control over both the list of names that will be included in the party electoral lists and the management of the electoral process itself does not bode well for the future of the country. A petition signed by over 100 well-known intellectuals and public figures, including the names of former Presidents Meidani and Moisiu, also voiced these same concerns. The disenfranchisement of LSI from the electoral structures could also potentially poison the pre-electoral atmosphere as the Party's small but militant base has openly expressed its anger over such a measure. The leader of LSI, Ilir Meta, has vowed to continue the opposition against a bill which he claims discriminates against his party and puts the future of Albanian democracy in question. Meta's hunger strike failed to deliver any tangible results for his party and base. What it may have given him, however, is motive and a cause on which he could build his electoral platform and make headway in the voting base of the Socialist Party.

Take me to Albania!

¶3. Although Prime Minister Sali Berisha is well known for getting a bit carried away when describing Albania's future, recent statements by the Prime Minister on various topics ranging from olive groves to

energy have raised eyebrows and left many Albanians - even those used to the PM's frequent rhetorical flourishes - wondering whether the Prime Minister has lost touch with reality.

14. Berisha recently surprised both the IMF and his economic advisers when he touted Albania's "double-digit" economic growth - an estimate more than double the consensus view of his own advisors and the IMF (which was still a respectable 4-5 percent). At another recent event, Berisha detailed his plans to make Albania "the region's superpower on energy generation," a statement many Albanians found amusing given the country's chronic power outages. The Prime Minister also pledged to bring Albania into the digital era by funding computers for "every school and every household," despite the fact that many of these households and schools lack running water or electricity. Finally, and most puzzling to many, was Berisha's guffaw-inspiring vow last week in Parliament to make Albania "the most beautiful olive grove in the Mediterranean," by planting 20 million olive trees in the coming years. Berisha was quick to add, however, that the 20 million trees is just a down payment on the eventual cultivation of 100 million trees.

15. Since 2005, (the year PM Berisha returned to power) Albanians have become used to grandiose talk on the part of the PM about one mega project after another. The Prime Minister, it seems, is simply not capable of thinking small. The problem comes when the PM's talk of a booming Albania clashes so sharply with the daily lives of many ordinary Albanians. The PM's penchant for grand ideas and visions reminds many Albanians of an old communist-era joke about a kindergarten teacher in Albania who was talking to her students about the "marvelous Albania". When she finished talking about the country she described as a garden with roses and flowers, a prosperous country whose people were the happiest in the world, a

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country where kids had everything, a boy in the back of the class began to cry. When the teacher asked the boy why he was crying, he shouted "I want to go and live in Albania, please take me there, please!"

WITHERS